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A Church Divided: Sex Worker Scandal Exposes Fault Lines in Anti-LGBTQ Church Network

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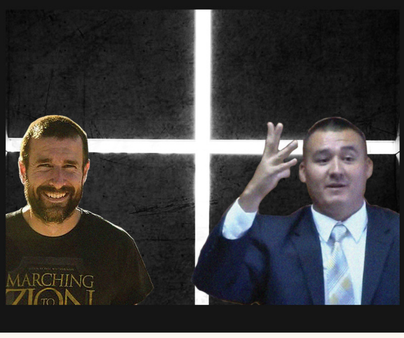

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Identity Unmasked

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An anti-LGBTQ pastor's admission to "sins" that included prostitutes, marijuana and gambling set off a series of events that roiled his congregation and caused a split in a satellite church in another state.

Pastor Donnie Romero resigned from Stedfast Baptist Church in Fort Worth, Texas, an anti-LGBTQ hate group. In a video posted to YouTube in January, Romero disclosed to his Forth Worth congregation that he had "not been ruling his house well" and admitted he was a "terrible husband and father." A week after his resignation, Romero posted a video in which he made several admissions. He said, "I went to a casino, and I was drinking, and there were girls there that were prostitutes, and I committed adultery on my wife multiple times. I drank and gambled multiple times. And I even smoked weed."

More than two years earlier, Romero attracted widespread media attention when he said that God should "finish the job" and kill the survivors of the mass shooting at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando, Florida, a place that catered primarily to LGBTQ clientele.

His resignation this year created a crisis at his Fort Worth church and led to a split in a Jacksonville congregation, a satellite church Romero also headed with the same name.

The crisis demonstrated an early division in a relatively new movement that includes a network of about 30 independent churches, including Stedfast Baptist Church.

The New Independent Fundamental Baptist Movement (New IFB) was spearheaded in part by Steven Anderson, another well-known anti-LGBTQ pastor. He is pastor of Faithful Word Baptist Church, an anti-LGBTQ hate group in Tempe, Arizona. Romero was a former congregant of Anderson's church before going to start the Fort Worth church with his mentor's blessing.

The leaders of these congregations regularly depict people who are LGBTQ as dangers to society, and this summer half a dozen pastors from the New IFB network held a conference where they encouraged the execution of LGBTQ people. More than 30 countries have banned Anderson because of his anti-LGBTQ rhetoric.

Anderson's New IFB is a split from the older IFB movement. He has said it is not a denomination but "a revival of what the old IFB once represented." IFB was founded in the 1940s to reclaim the fundamentalism of earlier decades. Like IFB congregations, New IFB churches use the King James Bible and interpret it literally.

Anderson revealed what prompted Romero to step down in another YouTube video posted Jan. 3. "Basically, the major sin was being with prostitutes. And then there was also marijuana and gambling that were also discovered," he said, without going into specifics.

After Romero resigned, Anderson traveled to Fort Worth to ordain Jonathan Shelley as the new pastor of Stedfast Baptist, which includes the Jacksonville congregation and another Stedfast satellite in Oklahoma City. Shelley had been an anti-LGBTQ pastor at New IFB's Pure Words Baptist Church in Houston. Shelley's ordination triggered a split in the Stedfast Baptist congregation in Jacksonville between those who supported him and those who did not.

The head of Stedfast Baptist Church in Fort Worth is also the head of other Stedfast churches until he fully ordains their preachers. Adam Fannin, then the preacher in Jacksonville, refused to accept Shelley's pastoral authority. In the ensuing turmoil, accusations of financial wrongdoing and personal slights abounded as all three church leaders — Anderson, Shelley and Fannin — released videos on YouTube criticizing each other. Those videos amassed hundreds of comments in support of either Anderson, Shelley or Fannin.

Anderson expressed his frustration with Fannin, describing him as "duplicitous," "selfish" and "disingenuous."

Fannin disputed accusations from video commenters that the New IFB is a cult and complained about the handling of Romero's resignation. He asserted that Anderson intentionally withheld details about Romero's behavior and declared that there was a "conspiracy and a cover-up" in Fort Worth. Fannin also attacked Romero's leadership ability and said that as a pastor he had failed the Jacksonville church.

Fannin further declared he was the "only God-ordained leadership" in all three of the Stedfast churches. In a reference to Shelley, he accused people from "the outside" of taking control of local situations such as the Romero scandal in Fort Worth. Fannin's video included a number of complaints about New IFB founder Anderson as well. He said that Anderson fired him via text message, thus "usurping the authority" of a local church.

Fannin alleged that some activities in the New IFB Movement "are not biblical," that a series of bad decisions in Arizona were creating "jerks in the movement" and that "Pastor Steven Anderson is not the sheriff of Stedfast Baptist Church." And he accused the Fort Worth church of hiding information about its finances.

A few days later, Anderson acknowledged financial irregularities at the Fort Worth church, but he claimed that questionable accounting practices also plagued the Jacksonville congregation.

Within a week of his ordination, Shelley fired Fannin and barred him and his supporters from all Stedfast churches. Fannin and his followers refused to vacate the Jacksonville building, leaving the remaining congregants who supported Shelley without a church. Pro-Shelley congregants eventually moved to a new building with new preachers.

Fannin has since launched Law of Liberty, a Jacksonville church that continues to attract derision from pastors in the New IFB. Shelley warned the Fort Worth congregation in a video posted in May about Fannin's church and its "self-ordained pastor."

Shelley's statements and the comments on that video reveal further discord over the split in the Jacksonville church and doctrine within the New IFB, demonstrating that this fight in the expanding movement known for its anti-LGBTQ rhetoric is far from over.

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